

Citizenship, Education and Governance in a Global Context

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Knowing one's rights as a citizen, and how to exercise them, means more than going to the polling station. It entails taking an interest in the day-to-day problems of one's home town, keeping oneself informed and informing others of current political and social issues and, at the same time, helping to integrate vulnerable groups and minorities into the community, in a spirit of solidarity and of shared responsibility for civic affairs.

It is also a matter of inculcating more widespread awareness of the principles of socially responsible consumerism and of all forms of behaviour and measures that perpetuate and strengthen mechanisms for the direct and indirect practice of democracy.

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Introduction

Two decades ago an adult who was innumerate and illiterate was considered to be at a great disadvantage in terms of navigating the challenges of individual personal growth and in terms of being able to participate actively in public life. However, today adults who are computer illiterate are considered to be at a similar disadvantage. The sad reality of civic education and education more broadly is that today, while a minority of the world's citizens speed off on the information superhighway, the majority, especially in developing countries, remain in potholes of disadvantage and exclusion from public deliberation and active democratic participation.

Compounding matters further is the reality that in a world of constrained resources for education, adult education, long the distant cousin of the broader educational family, remains badly under-funded in most societies around

the world. Sadly, many policy makers in developing and developed countries alike use a crude cost-benefit analysis to justify investment in children's education at the expense of adult education. This educational deficit has serious consequences for educational development generally and for the attainment of participatory democracy in particular. This challenge is all the more acute given the deepening democratic deficit that now reigns supreme in many countries around the world.

Given the above, we can easily see why many national elections are deeply flawed before the first ballot is cast. Adults who have been educationally deprived are more vulnerable to electoral manipulation. However, it is critically important for all of us today to ask the following questions: How democratic is our democracy? What do we need to do to democratise democracy? And here special mention is merited of those governments who see themselves as promoters of democracy and who might believe that they do not have to deal with their own deepening democratic deficits. For example, during the latest US Presidential elections, the fact that certain communities faced greater difficulty in casting their votes, the suspicions about the accuracy of the voting equipment and the power of incumbency (those in elected office are returned to office nearly 95% of the time) all suggest that the challenge of saving democracy is one that affects more countries in the world than many in power wish to admit. Broadening access to participation of all of humanity is the critical challenge of our time. But understanding the complexity of the moment of history we find ourselves in, and understanding the role of education to advance democratic participation, is critically needed at this juncture of human development.

Problematising Globalisation

It is against this backdrop that we need to explore the global context in which democracy and citizenship are being reshaped. What has erroneously been called the "anti-globalisation" movement is ironically one of the most globalised movements of our time. Globalisation has drawn the people of the world into closer proximity with one another; it has intensified contact between them; lowered many – but certainly not all – types of barriers to the movement of goods, ideas, technology and cultural products; and accelerated the pace at which information is shared. One of the contradictions of globalisation though is that we have seen the curtailment, particularly post-September 11, of what we might call "international civic mobility". As an African, travelling on

an African passport, working at the global level, I often muse that if I were to write a book about my time in my current job, the title of the publication would be, “Visas, Bloody Visas”. While cheaper travel has increased the movement of many, there has never been such a high the level of legal restrictions on movements of people from poor countries to rich countries, unless they have distinctive skills that the developed economies need. Those adults from developing countries who have educational deficits, even if they are literate, face these problems most acutely.

It is the more benign aspects of globalisation that have made possible gatherings like the World Social Forum, where tens of thousands of people from scores of countries organise themselves to descend upon a chosen destination at a given time, using email and the internet to coordinate everything from the programme schedule and travel arrangements to the advance exchange of discussion papers. One of the achievements of the World Social Forum is the broad diversity of educational competency amongst its participants. The average participant at the World Economic Forum will have at least a first university degree or much more.

Yet it is other aspects of globalisation which cause these meetings to be called in the first place – it is the harsh contradictions of globalisation, its unevenness, its sheer cruelty, that is driving people to join forces in collective efforts to discuss and debate ways to harness the forces of globalisation for the common good. These critiques of globalisation are now well known:

- Globalisation is exacerbating global inequality, and its “rules,” to the extent we can call them that, appear to be driven by the rich at the expense of the poor. The relentless lauding of so-called “free trade” in fact masks a set of double standards that protect certain markets in wealthy countries and deny poor and developing countries the chance to benefit from the most promising segments of their own economies.
- Globalisation and the forces driving it are throwing up a set of intractable challenges which brazenly cross national borders and which, by their very definition, defy intra-national solutions. The spread of environmental degradation, HIV/AIDS, human trafficking, the drug trade and terrorism are all enabled by globalisation.

- At the same time, the momentum toward economic, political and cultural integration weakens the ability of national governments to take actions in the national interest. Globalisation is having a seismic impact upon the traditional role of the state in service provision and is elevating the power of new actors, such as supranational governing institutions like the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and trans-national corporations. Local control over decision-making is rapidly shifting upwards to structures and processes that are not accountable to ordinary citizens.

Arguments about globalisation tend to occur in extreme terms – globalisation is often presented as either “all good” and full of promise for a better future, on one hand, or as irreparably flawed and diabolical, on the other. Yet globalisation is too complex and multi-faceted to be boiled down to a caricature. Independent surveysⁱ conducted in Northern and Southern countries over the last two years reveal that citizens are ambivalent about globalisation: they hold generally favourable opinions about global integration, yet they are highly anxious about growing inequality and the loss of local control. They are also concerned about the non-economic dimensions of globalisation such as threats to local culture and the disappearance of indigenous languages.

The grassroots action we have been witnessing on the streets of Porto Alegre, in cyberspace, outside the headquarters of the World Bank and IMF, is emerging in direct response to a perception that, increasingly, important decisions affecting people’s lives and well-being are being made in non-transparent ways in supranational institutions that are not accountable to citizens and not accessible to citizen engagement. Decisions about trade rules, intellectual property rights, macro-economic restructuring policies, privatisation of vital public services and debt relief are being made behind closed doors in ways that are largely perceived to be undemocratic. These avenues of political action are deeply dependent on a range of educational competencies: basic literacy, numeracy, analytical capabilities, and the basic ability to cut through the bias of much of the media hype that is fed to citizens around the world.

It is against this backdrop that the notion of “civil society” has re-entered mainstream discourse. Civil society is, of course, not a new concept, but it is one that has been re-discovered over the past decade with this rise in citizen

ⁱEnviroics survey, 2001 and 2002.

activism. Unfortunately, in the media and in the minds of some people, views about civil society as a whole are often framed by the actions of its “un-civil” elements – groups who espouse violence and destruction, or who pursue racist or exclusionary goals. Furthermore, activists are often portrayed as “radicals” who are not interested in dialogue.

Yet, what the World Social Forum and recent global civil society gatherings have come to represent for many people around the world are spaces where the voices of average citizens, irrespective of their educational competencies, “count” in discussions about social, political and economic justice. They are venues where people and groups who feel increasingly alienated from the prevailing global system can join together to explore alternative visions for a more ethical form of globalisation that works for the benefit of average people, rather than simply for the benefit of powerful interests.

Civil Society in the Context of Globalisation

Attempts to define civil society are often contested, but one way to think of it is in terms of the activities that are undertaken for the public good by groups or individuals in the space between the family, the state, and the market. This means that we must look today not only at non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – often taken as synonymous with civil society – but also at a rich array of heterogeneous civic elements that include trade unions, foundations, faith-based and religious groups, community-based organisations, social movements and networks and ordinary citizens who are active in the public sphere.

The last decade has witnessed a dramatic growth in the number of citizen groups and their capacity, scope, reach, public profile and influence. This ‘global associational revolution,’ as it has been called, is being driven by the same forces that are producing globalisation – democratisation, the spread of new technologies, and global integration of various forms – but it is also reacting to many of the effects of globalisation previously mentioned.

Historically, much of the work of civil society organizations (CSOs) has occurred at a micro-level, where they are involved in providing important services to vulnerable communities in areas as diverse as health care, education and professional training, legal advice, humanitarian relief, women’s empowerment, technical assistance in agriculture and environmental protection, and so on. Civil society groups have often stepped into the uneasy vacuum of post-

conflict situations and have compensated for the state – not without controversy – in the growing number of instances where vital public services have been rolled back due to macro-economic reforms.

Increasingly, however, civil society groups have recognised the need to rethink the well-known slogan “think globally, but act locally.” Experience has shown that acting locally will not get to the root cause of many social and economic problems – if the real locus of power is global, or regional, such as is increasingly the case for citizens in Europe as the European Union assumes a greater policy making remit than previously, then there is a need to “think locally and act globally” as well. A growing number of CSOs have become actively engaged in advocacy work, campaigning, and policy-making. Public campaigns on issues such as landmines, debt relief and the international criminal court have had a definable impact.

As civil society has matured, its credibility with outside audiences has grown. Many governments seek to harness the expertise and local knowledge of civil society groups in policy-making. High profile civil society groups, particularly those working around environmental issues, have developed a certain “brand recognition”; their endorsements or criticisms of business practices, for example, carry weight with the public and have become an important force with which the private sector must reckon. Perhaps most importantly, civil society groups generally enjoy a high level of public trust – in fact, a recent survey revealed that, among 17 institutions ranging from national governments to educational systems to media and the legal system, NGOs are the institutions most trusted by average citizens after their country’s armed forces.ⁱⁱ

The Challenges Facing Civil Society

Accordingly, civil society is attracting a new level of scrutiny in its role as a major public actor. It is being forced to grapple with both external and internal challenges, from those who are seeking to make civil society stronger and more credible to those who question its right to play certain roles. I would like to touch briefly upon five of these challenges.

The first is a **challenge of power and power imbalances** within civil society. The sector is vibrant and extremely diverse. It encompasses both major trans-

ⁱⁱ Study completed by the Canadian firm Environics and launched at the World Economic and Social Forums in January 2003.

national NGOs with multi-million dollar operating budgets and tiny citizen-based organisations with highly constrained resources, access to information and capacity. It embraces highly structured groups such as trade unions alongside loose issue-based social movements. While this diversity adds to the sector's richness it also throws up fundamental questions about whose voices are heard and in which venues, how resources are accessed and distributed, and who is speaking for whom.

The second challenge internal to civil society is **about bridging narrow interests and broader goals**. Many civil society actors are committed to advancing a specific issue, whether this involves protecting rainforests, promoting fair labour practices or advancing women's rights. While recent civil society activity has been noteworthy for the alliances that have been formed among groups with different areas of interest, there remains a type of "silo mentality" which prevents CSOs from working across areas of speciality towards common goals.

For example, dialogue between human rights organisations and development organisations has historically been weak and many potentially productive synergies have evaded us. With many human rights organisations now embracing social and economic rights, and with many development organisations adopting a rights-based approach to their work, it is an opportune time to bridge this divide. The dichotomy between the world of volunteering (defined as the provision of direct services to communities in need) and the world of social activism (defined as that which more is concerned with structural and policy change) remains a challenge. We also need to create an environment where, for example, NGOs rise to defend workers' rights of association in cases where trade union rights are threatened, and where trade unions vocally defend the rights of NGOs.

A third internal challenge for civil society is **to articulate a coherent vision for a more just and equitable global system**. One of the frequent criticisms of the so-called "anti-globalisation" movement is that it is against everything imaginable, but not for anything discernible. Although many within the movement are working proactively for social and economic justice, civil society is challenged to move beyond debate and ad-hoc mobilisations and formulate a strategy for achieving its vision. The core issue, however, may not be an absence of alternative visions, but rather the fact that the world's powerful governments appear to be unwilling to engage with these alternatives. As an exam-

ple, the 2001 study produced by Third World Network for the UNDP, entitled *The Multilateral Trading System: A Development Perspective*, provides a detailed set of recommendations for transforming the international trade system into an instrument for balanced and equitable human development. Yet because they seek to redress power imbalances, such visions are often rejected out of hand.

The fourth challenge is one that emanates from outside civil society. The allegation is made that **citizen activism threatens to undermine democratic systems** by “short-circuiting” established procedures for decision-making. This is a critique that we in civil society vehemently reject. An active, engaged citizenry is essential for a healthy democratic society. We must resist the notion that elections equal democracy, that a victory at the ballot box is a blank check to rule without any interface and dialogue with citizens in between election periods. To reduce democracy to the singular act of voting once every four or five years is clearly an error. Civic activism complements democratic practices and makes them more effective by drawing citizens more fully into public life and providing a constant check on official accountability.

Clearly, it does not make sense for political leaders to deprive themselves of the policy knowledge that civil society actors acquire from working directly with vulnerable communities. Who better to inform the drafting of a domestic violence law than women who work with survivors of such violence? Who better to inform the drafting of an adult literacy strategy than those that work day in and day out with adult learners in our communities? Who better to help craft a rural or urban development strategy than those that work on the ground addressing these issues? Studies show that engagement with citizen voices leads to more effective policies that better address the concerns of primary and secondary stakeholders, that integrate innovative ideas and knowledge from the local level, and that result in greater reach and ownership within communities.

The fifth challenge is perhaps the most complex of all, and is heard both inside and outside civil society. Here I am referring to the challenge of **legitimacy** and the related issues of transparency, representation and accountability.

Challenges to civil society’s legitimacy come from many quarters. They are often voiced by national political leaders and occasionally by prominent voices at global institutions. It is frequently said that civil society groups don’t repre-

sent the views of anyone but themselves and that if they are accountable at all, it is usually “upwards” to their funders, rather than “downwards” to those whom they purportedly serve.

Legitimacy cannot be taken for granted and must continuously be earned and civil society groups are taking up this challenge head on. Self-regulation mechanisms such as codes of ethics and standards of excellence have been adopted at the national level by civil society in several countries; a culture of transparency in governance structures is also gaining strength across the sector. Civil society groups work to derive mandates and legitimacy for their activities through extensive consultative processes.

There is also a powerful accountability factor in play with the functioning of CSOs, which CIVICUS calls the principle of “perform or perish.” Not a single cent secured to undertake CSO activities is secured on the basis of obligation. Whether funding is derived from a government department, individual, foundation, business organisation or multi-lateral institution, resources will not continue to be available if civic organisations are not performing on the basis of their vision, mission and objectives.

I would like to emphasise, therefore, that the issue of civil society legitimacy is a valid one – particularly when it is voiced with an eye to building up the long-term credibility and effectiveness of civil society as an actor. All too frequently, however, the critique is lodged by those who would dismiss the right of civil society groups to give voice to citizen concerns and to engage in decision-making processes.

Civil Society, the Crisis of Governance and the “Democracy Deficit”

The view that government has a monopoly on truth and wisdom reflects an outdated notion of governance, one that sees it as the exclusive domain of governments. In the case of electoral systems, governance occurs through a system of representative democracy where citizens vote for individuals to represent them and leaders to make decisions on their behalf.

It is rapidly becoming a truism that this old notion of governance is breaking down in an era of globalisation with the emergence of a devastating “democracy deficit” in several local and national contexts, and certainly in a global context. There are declining levels of citizen trust in political institutions. In many

democratic systems the “form” has largely overtaken the “substance” of democracy: elections may be held, but fewer and fewer people are choosing to vote and the meaningful interface between citizens and the elected is minimal between election periods. Affiliation with traditional political parties is on the decline as the parties themselves are characterised by a lack of internal democracy or fail to address issues that citizens believe to be important. The influence of monied interests in many political systems is also turning citizens away from traditional engagement in favour of new forms of participation.

Although faith in traditional political institutions is waning this should not be taken as a sign of citizen apathy. On the contrary, people are finding new and more direct ways to get involved in public life and decision-making – marking a shift from representative democracy to what is often called participatory democracy. Citizens are arguing for a new notion of governance that requires political leadership to engage with citizenry in ways that allow for on-going input into decision-making and policy formation.

These new models take many forms, ranging from concerted attempts to build public-private partnerships to the establishment of transparency and oversight mechanisms, which allow civil society groups to play quasi-regulatory or watchdog functions. The Social Watch Network based in Uruguay is an excellent example of how civil society groups have taken the initiative to monitor progress on international commitments and to report publicly on findings. This type of public accountability mechanism is now widely regarded as an essential part of good governance.

Finally, civil society groups are slowly carving out a more active role in actual decision-making processes, as witnessed by their direct participation over the last decade in UN conferences, with some national governments including civil society participants in their delegations. Certain innovative international commissions involve civil society groups as equal stakeholders in policymaking, rather than in an after-the-fact consultative role.

While the space for civic participation in the global policy-making environment is growing, the overall picture overwhelmingly remains one where citizen voices are marginalised or are belatedly solicited after key decisions have been taken. Some key examples:

- The constrained status of CSO engagement can be seen in the case of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), perhaps the most important, albeit flawed in many respects, development initiative of our time. Although thousands of CSOs actively campaign around the issues that have been targeted in the MDGs, there was no significant role for civil society in the development of these goals. If the Millennium Goals are to be achieved, ordinary citizens around the world, whether they be literate or not, must feel a true sense of ownership and must be willing to campaign to hold their governments accountable to them. This can only happen if the MDGs are “owned” by the people and not appropriated by elements of the international system.
- If we were to ask ourselves to name the single most important act that a national government engages in annually, we would most probably agree that it is drawing up the national budget. In analysing budgets, we can see how much a government values children, gender equality, older people, education and so forth. However, when we look at the level of influence that parliamentarians have over the budgeting process, let alone that of civil society, it is frighteningly minimal in many systems of governance. What does this say about the quality of governance and the strength of democracy?
- If we reflect on the positions taken by certain governments with regard to the situation in Iraq, we find clear instances where governments blatantly disregarded the views of their backbench MPs, ignoring the views of their citizenry and, in some cases, crassly manipulating arguments and supposed “evidence” to support a military intervention that has provoked a devastating humanitarian crisis in Iraq that has threatened to polarise the world’s peoples even further.

To understand the voicelessness that so many citizens feel, we perhaps need to look more deeply at the discourse around social exclusion. In the coming decades humanity should judge itself not on the basis of the progress made by the most privileged sections of the global populace, but on the basis of the progress made by those that have been historically marginalised. This includes minority communities such as people living with HIV/AIDs, people with disabilities, racial, ethnic, religious and cultural minorities, indigenous peoples, people with alternative sexual orientations, people who are not literate and so on, and should also include constituencies not often thought of as minorities *per se*.

Young people are becoming increasingly alienated from public life. On my continent, given the decimation being caused by HIV/AIDS and the fundamental impact it is having on our demography, in very real ways young people are not simply the leaders of tomorrow, but are leaders of today as well. We must also consider older people and take note of the levels of alienation they feel and the fact that we deprive ourselves of their experiential wisdom. We must live up to the scandalous fact that, after decades of activism for full gender equality, women still occupy on average less than 10% of leadership positions in government and business. What does it say about the quality of our democracy when women are so heavily under-represented even in long standing democratic countries, let alone those that are fledgling democracies? When we add this all up, it becomes increasingly difficult to deny that the democratic voice does not prevail in public life and that we are facing a serious “democracy deficit” on multiple levels.

We do not suggest that civil society is intrinsically good and that governments are intrinsically bad. That is far too simplistic. However, we need to recognise that effective democracy needs a vibrant civil society as well as an effective and accountable government. Both face struggles of accountability, but they bring a vital diversity to governance and provide complementary and mutual accountability systems. We can anticipate that this arena will always be contested, but this should strengthen democratic practice rather than weaken it.

Given the shift of power from national to global levels, it has become a critical priority for civil society to be embraced at a global level, yet it is here that the “democracy deficit” is felt most strongly. Many of the global institutions that have become increasingly powerful in our current age were constructed at a particular moment in world history that is a far cry from the context we currently find ourselves within. The geopolitics of 1945 continue to dominate the governance structures of key institutions, even at this point deep into the post-colonial era. We need to concede that many of these public institutions appear to be operating under rules that are not in keeping with the realities that citizens confront around the world today. Clearly the time has come for a revamping of governance institutions within a more visionary framework that puts the interests of people at the centre of our deliberations.

Implications for Adult Education

Ensuring that citizens have a basic educational competency to be able to receive a broad spectrum of information and make up their minds about their own views and perspectives is critically necessary for addressing the macro challenges identified above. Too many citizens are spectators in a game of governance when they should indeed be central players at the local, national and global levels.

Seeking a more innovative and creative role for the mainstream media to offer citizens these alternative perspectives is a critical success factor for enabling participation. In the electronic media environment the notions of “infotainment and edutainment” have gained some currency over the last two decades even though much more needs to be done.

While we seek ways to advance educational empowerment for adults we need to recognise that there are many brilliant leaders who have not been able to read and write and some of the most inspirational leaders in society are sometimes those who were too poor to secure educational progress in their own lives. In Africa, for example, the substantial reach of radio suggests that citizens who are educationally underprivileged can still participate in debates and participate actively in public life. The sad reality of broadening educational access to adults is that those who gravitate towards educational opportunities are those who are relatively educationally “rich” already. This challenges civil society generally and adult education practitioners specifically to promote the notion of life long learning more vigorously.

We live in times of immense and rapid change, and unless adults are continually being enabled to continue to advance their educational skills and knowledge they will soon find that their ability to participate is diminished. We can see that whereas in the past seeking democracy was simply a local and national affair, with intensifying globalisation we now need the knowledge and the skills to analyse and understand how global discourse, global institutions and global practices effect our democratic reality at the domestic level.

Final Thoughts

Few would contest that we are in the midst of one of the most volatile and dangerous periods of world history. New threats to our security – both natural and human-made – challenge us like never before to find common ground in the

pursuit of social justice and sustainable development. I would argue that, if this is to be successful in the long run, we are facing a double challenge of reinventing democracy, along the lines discussed above, and reinventing a viable, equitable and just economic system that is premised less on the imperative of crude economic growth and more on a model that marries environmental sustainability, poverty eradication and broad-based development. Failure to include notions of justice, equity and fairness in this process will be fatal indeed.

The gap in inequality is growing, and with it the space for dialogue and common ground may be shrinking irrevocably. The recent public assertion by none other than the UK Trade Secretary that there is an incontrovertible link between peace and prosperity, between destitution, war, conflict and terrorism, is an unusually explicit one for a top figure in a wealthy government. But Patricia Hewitt's remarks echo the concerns of hundreds of thousands of us in civil society who fear the consequences if current trends are allowed to continue unchecked.

One of the challenges that we face is not to allow current institutional limitations to constrain our ability to envision a different kind of governance framework. We have to pose some bold questions about the fundamental changes that are needed to create a framework that is more fair and equitable than the one we are currently working within, and that has a realistic chance of delivering social, political and economic justice. We must question the prevailing logic of a system that enables the movement of capital, but not of people, across boundaries; a financial system that essentially rewards unemployment and consolidates a notion of jobless growth; a system that rewards rampant over-consumption rather than grappling with the challenge of sustainable development.

Our vision should be of a world where citizens and the groups they choose to organise are regarded as legitimate stakeholders, not only by the public, among whom they already enjoy high levels of trust, but by governance institutions who value engagement and recognise the many benefits it brings.

Our vision should be of a world where those of us who are serious about the long term future of this planet address these questions, as difficult and as intractable as they are, honestly, courageously and with a commitment to ensuring that the views of not only government and business are considered, but also those of citizen groups working at the local, national and global levels.

Failure to do this will leave us charged by future generations with tinkering with incremental adjustments here and there, when what is required is a fundamental rethink of a national and international governance architecture that is rooted in notions of democracy, social and economic justice and sustainability.

In conclusion, we all face the challenge of doing our work in our different institutional environments in ways in which we ensure that we respect and value the integrity, wisdom and contributions that the poor themselves can bring to the development process. The poor should be considered as full citizens and not simply victims, as full citizens and not simply recipients, as full citizens and not merely beneficiaries or charity cases. Every single human being that walks this planet has the potential to make a positive contribution to public life, whether he or she be educationally privileged or not. The challenge for all of us as citizens is to ensure that we create just, meaningful and relevant ways in which this contribution can be harnessed for the public good. Unless we put people, and particularly those who have been historically excluded, at the centre of public life, our development goals will continue to evade us.

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